

ALOESWOOD

FRIEND OF TEA



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Incense is a Way, a Dao, as complex, involving and full of lifelong devotion as the Way of Tea. It is a practice that adheres to all the same principles of tea, which is why we have devoted a whole issue to incense and tea. Both reached the mainstream through Buddhist temples, and therefore began as a way of honoring the Buddha, within and without. Both take us to our heart-center, where the Buddha, the awakened self, resides in glory. Both tea and incense honor the present moment, expressing reverence through mindfulness of one's every action, however minute. Tea and incense are truly rich worlds, and richly intertwined like the mingling smoke from a stick dancing through the steam from an old teapot.

Within the world of incense, no topic is as deep as Aloeswood, the "Friend of Tea." We hope that the following three articles, as well as the further readings we will post on our blog, will help you stand back in awe at how vast the world of Aloeswood and incense ceremony is. We also hope to inspire you to further study, practice and enjoyment.

Aloeswood and tea meet in that place where Nature exalts the senses in a pure and clean way that uplifts consciousness, bringing clarity to the moment. Like tea, Aloeswood takes Nature time to produce, and involves the cooperation of many different species. Like tea, the whole world is in each whiff—the forest, roots and earth, water and wind, sky and even Heavenly bodies. May you smell the glory of fine Aloeswood through these pages, heart full of beauty and happiness.

Since long before people could write, we have burned herbs, oils and resins to purify ourselves before ceremonies and to make offerings in homage to the Divine. Ancient Chinese doctors, and before them shamans, used the smoke from fragrant plants to heal various ailments, physical and spiritual. Indeed, there is a cleansing feeling that comes with the smoke of these rare plants, and, in the least, they help calm and center us, much like a fine tea.

There is also a great beauty in the curling wisps of smoke that incense produces. The smoke is formless; it moves and writhes to an inner melody suggested by the slightest movement of the air. Watching incense smoke shift formlessly suggests many of the same sentiments that the shapeless liquor of tea does—moving into and becoming the vessels it travels through, including us. Both tea and incense move in and out of form in profound ways.

A fine tea, some nice music and a fragrant coil or stick of incense together are a recipe for a wonderful session. Like the ancients, we use incense to purify the space and ourselves, furthering the sentiment in Cha Dao that implies that we are all ordained in the tea space. In tea, there is no caste or class, no gender or ego—we are all hermits who have traveled deep into the inner mountains; lost above the clouds, we wander, whereabouts unknown. We also offer incense to Tea, our goddess *Thea*: for the way She connects us to Nature and for the great joy She brings to our lives. We are saying thanks to the world for all the hard work that went into bringing this tea to us, from Nature to the farmer who worked so hard to process it, and then on to all those who helped carry it to our doors.

But not all kinds of incense are conducive to a tea session, or to being around tea at all. After all, a fine tea has a wonderful fragrance all its own. And tea is a very sensitive plant, especially to aromas. If you put flower blossoms into a jar of tea, the leaves inside would quickly smell and taste like that fragrance. Obviously, we don't want to overpower the fragrance

of the tea we're brewing. But we also have to be careful about burning powerful incense around the places where we store our tea leaves, as they could easily be affected by the smell of the incense. A lot of incense, especially those made from essential or perfume oil, create a heavy smoke that lingers and overpowers all fragrance in the room. When you burn such a stick, your clothes will carry the smell, sometimes for hours. As Chajin we know that many people begin their contact with tea through its fragrance. This is truer of certain teas, like greens and oolongs, for example, but is there for any tea. Most beginners are first attracted to a tea by its fragrance. As such, we don't want to affect their process of enjoyment (falling in love with tea), so we try to refrain from wearing perfume, essential oils or cologne to tea sessions. We honor and respect the space that way. The same applies to most incense. And yet, incense plays a part in tea sessions around the world. There are many kinds of incense that can enhance certain teas, and even blends we can use with all tea, but there is a very special kind of incense that is beyond all others in every way: *Aloe wood*.

Aloe wood is sometimes called "Agarwood," "*Jinko*," "*Kyara*" or even just "Agar." Aloe wood is a dark, very resinous heartwood, not of species of tree itself. It grows in all the species of the *Aquilaria* and *Gyrinops* genuses, which are evergreens. *Aquilaria malaccensis* is the most common species to form this kind of heartwood. The wood itself is not fragrant, but when it is infected by mold, subjected to manmade attacks (cutting into the tree) or even a kind of cancer (called a "burl" in trees), the tree builds a layer of protective resin around the infection. This resin-filled wood slowly turns from light pinewood in color to dark and fragrant, and is what is used for making Aloe wood incense.

Lower-grade Aloe wood comes from Indonesia and the best from Vietnam. There was also once a lot of Aloe wood in southern China as well. But location is not the only way to gauge quality; there is also whether or not the resin was produced naturally and then how old it is. The older the



heartwood is the better. It gets darker and more resinous over time, due to fermentation.

The finest grades of Aloe wood are amongst the rarest and most expensive natural resources in the world. The best Aloe wood is produced naturally and involves the cooperation of millions of microbes, much like puerh tea. A special mold on the tree causes the tree to protect itself with a barrier resin. When the tree dies, the wood surrounding the resin decays. Meanwhile, the microbes continue to interact with the Aloe wood resin, and that continues even after it is found and harvested. This kind of Aloe wood can even be consumed/drunk, whereas lower grades, produced by cutting the tree or intentionally infesting it with mold, cannot be drunk.

For years now, the *Aquilaria* genus has been endangered and forests are starting to be protected worldwide.



The Aloeswood we sourced for your gift this month came from an aged chunk of heartwood buried for some time, and was therefore sustainably harvested and produced into sticks.

A tiny bit of this amazing heartwood, produced by natural processes working together, is enough to create many sticks of incense. An odorless binding wood is used to keep the precious Aloeswood together.

Aloeswood is amazing for tea because its smoke is light and never clings, always drifting like mist into nothingness. The fragrance is sweet and delicious and awakens the taste buds and olfactory senses, encouraging you to taste and smell more in your tea, while never overpowering the tea's fragrance. Aloeswood centers you and calms you down. In fact, you won't smell higher-grade Aloeswood incense unless your heart is steady and peaceful; it is easily missed if you

aren't at ease and paying attention. It has a way of drifting into the background and you can forget it's burning if you aren't fully present to it. This is nice as it means that you can also focus on your tea when you want to.

Place the incense stick, or a piece of it if you want to share it for multiple sessions, into a holder, leaving some distance between the incense and your teaware. Allow it to purify you, perhaps brushing some over your body. If you would like to, put your hands together and allow the incense to represent your gratitude for Tea and all the joy and transformation, new friends and Global Tea Hut family She has brought to your life. Take a very slow and deep inhalation through your nose. Let the fragrance fill you up and center your heart. Then, begin making tea as usual. Notice how you are more

meditative and steady-handed. Your brewing comes more fluidly. When it comes time to drink the tea, see how the incense doesn't impinge upon your ability to enjoy the tea and its own fragrance, but rather you seem to smell more, as if smelling the incense deeply before starting tea somehow opened your nose up. The fragrance of the Aloeswood will drift in and out of the session. Don't search for it. Let it come and go as it pleases, noticing how it doesn't disturb your tea. Also, take a moment to savor the smoke itself, celebrating the way it shimmers formlessly in such magnificent curls and bunches of flowers, which cluster, roll and then unfurl into thin air.

